

Death Valley Ranch Entrance Gates and Dungeon Apartment  
Death Valley National Monument  
Inyo County  
California

HABS No. CA-2257 H

HABS  
CAL,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DEATH VALLEY RANCH ENTRANCE GATES AND DUNCEON APARTMENT  
(Scotty's Castle, Gate House)

HABS No. CA-2257 H

Location: National Park Service Route 5 (commonly known as the North Highway), 25 miles west of the junction of US Route 95 with Nevada State Route 267 (commonly known as Scotty's Junction), Death Valley National Monument, Inyo County, California.

Present Owner: National Park Service.

Present Use: Entrance gates and residential apartment.

Significance: The Entrance Gates create the first major impression of the Death Valley Ranch complex. Because they were one of the last projects to be started, only the concrete sub-structure which included an apartment below the roadway was built before all construction ceased in May of 1931. Left unfinished, they physically demonstrate that plans for construction greatly exceeded the resources for the Ranch.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Note: For general information on the Death Valley Ranch complex, see HABS No. CA-2257.

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection:

By December 1927 - Plans for Entrance Gates began.<sup>1</sup>  
June 1930 - Excavation for Entrance Gates was almost finished and Thompson received a copy of the blueprints.<sup>2</sup>  
December 1930 - All the footings and walls up to grade had been poured.<sup>3</sup>  
January 1931 - All concrete to the level of the top of the "wing walls" had been poured.<sup>4</sup>  
May 1931 - All construction came to a halt.  
1978 - NPS completed the interior of apartment.

2. Architect: Charles Alexander MacNeillage.

3. Original and Subsequent Owners:

Albert Mussey Johnson (1930-1948)  
Gospel Foundation (1948-1970)  
National Park Service (1970-Present)

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4. Builders:

General Superintendent - M. Roy Thompson  
Building Superintendent - H.B. Brown (1930)  
C.G. Johnson (1930-1931)

5. Original plans and construction: Plans calling for stone to be an element of the design for the entrance gates were considered as early as December 1927. At one point MacNeilledge wrote Thompson that he "thinks it would be a good plan to gather up all the rock in the flats and pile it near the new entrance gates . . . as I shall want to build a stone wall from the road connecting with the gates."<sup>5</sup>

Construction for the Entrance Gates, however, did not get underway until sometime close to June 1930. Work was interrupted at least once in October 1930 when all the carpenters were fully engaged in the extension of the "gravel plant."<sup>6</sup>

The original drawings by MacNeilledge called for the entire structure to be faced with stone so as "to make it appear as if the structure were all ancient stone construction."<sup>7</sup> The name "Death Valley Ranch" was to be carved in the arch spanning the entrance from the roadway. An apartment below the roadway, entitled the "Dungeon," was also planned in the original construction designs. Although all the exterior concrete walls were poured, the interior of the apartment was never even begun. Metal grilles similar to those of other structures were designed for the windows, but never installed.

At one point Johnson thought the "lower lake," a man-made impoundment of water from the natural spring up the canyon, would make a suitable swimming area for the workmen and the Indians.<sup>8</sup>

6. Alterations and additions: In 1978 the NPS finished the interior of the "Dungeon" apartment. A concrete slab was poured on the plain dirt floor. Carpet and tiling were added over that. Interior walls were given a textured concrete surface and a dropped acoustic tile ceiling with recessed lighting was added. Window openings, which up until then had been boarded with plywood, were equipped with metal-sash sliding-glass windows. The NPS filled in the roofs of each of the pylons, which until then had been left open to the air.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: All work on the Entrance Cates stopped in 1931, leaving many elements of the original design incomplete. The plans called for the building to be faced with stone, but only the concrete sub-structure was completed. Two crenelated pylons, square in plan, flank the entrance to the Castle from the road. They are connected with a concrete arch that spans the roadway leading into the complex. The pylons also support a massive wooden gate with ornate hand-wrought iron fittings. The entrance is highlighted by two curving walls that stretch from the outside corners of the pylons toward the road. The apartment below road level is entered through a spiral staircase in the south pylon. The north pylon contains a ladder for emergency exits. The bridge is supported by concrete beams and spans a man-made pond.

2. Condition of Fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 18' x 36'.
2. Foundations: Concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The concrete walls have been left unfinished and blonde in color.
4. Structural system, framing: The walls are poured-in-place concrete. The concrete bridge is supported by concrete beams.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Each pylon has an entrance door made of "antiqued" tongue-and-groove slab wood that is fastened with hand-forged metal strap hinges.
  - b. Windows: All the windows have steel sash, vertical lights and move along sliding tracks.
6. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: Each pylon has a flat roof.
  - b. Cornice, eaves: Parapet walls of the pylons are crenelated.

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C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: See measured drawings.
2. Flooring: Closet, kitchen and stairway landing have red tiled floors. The bedroom and bathroom have gray carpeting.
3. Wall and Ceiling Finish: All interior walls have had a finish of textured concrete added in 1978. The dropped acoustic tile ceiling with recessed lighting was added at approximately the same time.
4. Openings: Interior doors are made of stained tongue-and-groove slab wood and have hand-forged metal strap hinges and decorative metal studs. All trim is similar in color and wood type.

D. Site:

The bridge spans a man-made impoundment of water that supports the growth of many willows, planted by Thompson in 1930,<sup>9</sup> as well as a great deal of volunteer vegetation. These elements combine to make the area a natural habitat for fish and wildlife, and an important water element in the overall landscaping of the grounds.

Directly to the east is a long grass lawn bordered by wild grapevines and palm trees. Originally known as the "lower field", the NPS planted the grass in 1974 and now maintains it as a picnic and recreation area for the visiting public.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Scotty's Castle Recording Project at Death Valley National Monument, California, was undertaken during the summers 1987-89 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, and co-sponsored by the Western Regional Office of the National Park Service. Principals involved were Robert J. Kapsch, Chief of HABS/HAER; Kenneth L. Anderson, AIA, Chief of HABS and project leader in 1987 and 1988; and Paul D. Dolinsky, Principal Architect of HABS and project leader in 1989.

The recording teams were supervised in the field by Marlys B. Thurber in 1987, John White in 1988, and Joseph D. Balachowski in 1989. The written documentation was prepared by Richard A. Bernstein of Cornell University in 1987.

PART IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The repository of nearly all of the sources of information is the Reference Library and Preservation Office, Scotty's Castle, Death Valley National Monument, California. Individual references take the form of endnotes, as follows:

1. Letter from Charles Alexander MacNeilledge to M. Roy Thompson, dated December 6, 1927. Manuscript 7, box 20.
2. Letters from M. Roy Thompson to Charles Alexander MacNeilledge, both dated June 6, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 11.
3. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated December, 30, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 13.
4. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated January 9, 1931. Manuscript 12, box 4.
5. Letter from Charles Alexander MacNeilledge to M. Roy Thompson dated December 9, 1927. Manuscript 7, box 20.
6. Letters from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated October 3, 1930 and October 16, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 12.
7. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Nevada State Employment Office, Las Vegas, Nevada dated May 5, 1931. Manuscript 7, box 13.
8. Letter from Albert M. Johnson to M. Roy Thompson dated February 22, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 19.
9. "I note that you have stuck over one hundred willow sticks with branches near the creek below the lower pond." A letter from Albert M. Johnson to M. Roy Thompson dated February 17, 1930. Manuscript 7, box 19.